

## **In Suspicious Minds: crisis in the subject between truth and truthiness**

Alexandra Grieve-Johnson

Independent

e-mail: [lexie.grievejohnson@gmail.com](mailto:lexie.grievejohnson@gmail.com)

It will be seen that minds do not create truth or falsehood. They create beliefs, but when once these beliefs are created, the mind cannot make them true or false... What makes a belief true is a fact, and this fact does not (except in exceptional cases) in any way involve the mind of the person who has the belief. (Bertrand Russell 1997, 129)

In the milieu of meme culture and post-truth politics, the true, as it refers to fact, is often poised against opinion and belief rather than falsehood and error. Within contemporary politics and the digital-social sphere, the value of truth has fallen from grace into semantics and relativism. As more of our lives and world unfold in the digital, moreover, it is frequently not empirical facts, but their representations that we encounter. Without the familiar subject-object relation between minds and the material, suspicion and belief find themselves at home. This essay considers the ways in which the shifting immaterial of the present age, and its fostering of distrust, throws the already troubled dualism of truth into imbalance. But in asking if a climate of suspicion endangers truth, one eventually comes around to the suspicious, and

sentimental position of the question itself, disclosing not only an unstable fate for truth, but self.

As a value judgement conferred on a fact in the world, truth is at once made of subjective perceptions, and independent of them. We believe in certain facts and proofs about the nature of physics and assign laws, as a means of interpreting and understanding the world around, and outside of our own direct experience. We accept that there are facts and truths, but from our own isolated subjective minds, they are inaccessible through anything other than a subjective lens. In this sense, suspicion is an unlikely, and unshakeable companion of the true: we can never know our environment in the way we know ourselves, and thus approach it with care, and fear. The epistemic and ontological troubles of knowing or seeing 'truth' as it exists outside ourselves place it as one of the enduring questions of philosophy: it is in crisis in the present moment only as it has been since time immemorial.

Unlike the true, our experience of it is in constant flux, and as the digital-virtual challenges and shifts our relation with world, so too it shifts our relation with truth. In many ways, the so-called 'post-truth' of the present age is a Nietzschean and postmodern triumph: the toppling of Reason, after God, reveals an alienating instability at the core, defined by power and perspective rather than enduring or universal essence. But while truth is not substantively the same across ethics, aesthetics, mathematics, and metaphysics, and while some truths are justly challenged and rejected under the scrutiny of hindsight, the concept and value of truth remains regardless of perspective: it is true that I drank coffee this morning; and it is true that human-induced climate change will impact our living conditions irreversibly.

Truth in this sense is impervious to shifting cultural judgements, or distrust of its veracity. When someone makes the claim that climate change is a hoax, the climate remains unmoved: ecological disaster does not reverse simply because we don't believe in it. Thus under the auspices of the 'post-truth', truth is in danger in so far as our relation with world, as knowers, is endangered. Pervasive political propaganda, gaslighting, and rhetoric, and the apparent acceptance of the logic non sequitur triumphed by the Trump administration, climate-change sceptics, and the 'alt-right', obscures the relationship between truth claims, and their corresponding facts. Echoing Bertrand Russell, beliefs interpret, but do not amount to, facts, and nor therefore truth. Remaining within a cycle of suspicion and belief hinders a relationship with our environment beyond the self. Bound in suspicion, or fear, the post-truth approaches the true as something to be believed, or disbelieved.

Associating with the minds that create beliefs, the distrust of the 'post-truth' is unconcerned with the veracity, or implications of facts: only what minds make of them matters. People speak of climate change in terms of 'belief', in the same breath as God or religion, as if to hold an alternate belief means evading the consequences of another. That there are opinions on the natural world reflects both an acceptance and rejection of objective reality, but without sense of contradiction or error: we can believe in the objective propositions of scientific truths, it seems, but disbelieve their logical conclusions. Suspicious thinking troubles truth in so far as it precludes an understanding of error: grounded in sentiment and intuition, suspicion does not have an opposite. Knowing "true" from "false", or those who speak the truth from those who lie is made difficult when collective facts, knowledge, and truth, are obscured by their disregard: when Donald Trump declares that socialism is about "one thing only...power for the ruling class", he is asserting a propositional truth that does not accord with the material-actual: there is a disjunct between the statement, and the object of knowledge. Reducing truth to political semantics disrupts the relation with

what we think, and what is. In so doing, untruth, or post-truth, hides and complicates our tethers to reality.

In suspicious minds, truth loses not only objectivity, but the tools of reason that challenge prevailing opinion. While the true has historically been defined by the powerful, it has also grown in conversation with the experiences and ideas of others, and of world. In the post-truth, the ability to think rationally and causally— to uncover — is in strife. Under the suspicion and belief that permeates online forums and social media ‘trolling’, empirical facts become debatable, and erasable, data: and something material and incontrovertible as climate change becomes a political agenda, divorced from the semantics of ‘weather’. When fact is undermined by suspicion, the means to autonomy and freedom of thought are quashed, but so is our relationship with the world as it is. Truth and reason rely on reciprocity, or mutual agreement, in order to maintain meaning: if not everyone plays along, we become lost.

The disruption and destabilisation of truth affects not only values of autonomy, freedom, and knowledge, but our experience of the world. Glancing to Heidegger, it is useful to think of truth in this context as *aletheia*, roughly translated as an unconcealment, or letting-be. If propositions do not conform to the objects of their knowledge, the essence of things remains hidden. Insisting that truth is in essence freedom (2008, 74), untruth, as post-truth, or suspicion, inhibit a letting-be: it obscures, disrupts, and conceals a true relation with self and world. By way of tangible example, denying changes to the environment under global warming prohibits a relationship with the environment that is in accord with its actuality. In such an instance, the knower is not only compromised, but unable to join aspects of subjective existence with objective existence. Concealing the objective also has implications for the subjective, and as Heidegger would infer, being far from world is

to be far from being. "He [man] is all the more mistaken the more exclusively he takes himself, as subject, to be the standard for all beings". Errancy, Heidegger insists, leads us astray (79).

Our experience of truths is grounded in a relation with things, or environment. The facts of the world translate to facts of our being, as reference points, or anchors. The loss of thinking, or the errancy of thought, with which Heidegger is concerned in "On the Essence of Truth" reflects his broader concerns that under the technological, being is left in fallow. The digital sphere, littered with opinion, abuse, contradiction, and without an object of reference, challenges the phenomenology we ordinarily encounter, and know. A world of perspective, it is without facts, and vies with the actual. In so far as it takes us far from the world— its objectivity, and its facticity— and endangers our freedom as knowers, the digital and the post-truth conceal, in part, the free at the essence of truth. In so doing, suspicious minds entrap the subject in immanent obscurity.

Hiding in the uncertainty of untruth and suspicion, we cannot see the crisis through the kipple, endangering our physical and ontological dwelling. If the truth is a letting be, or freeing, it is also a means to transcendence, and denying facts from a position of suspicion entraps, rather than frees. But to follow such tangents is to follow a path of sentiment: to imbue our being with the very mysticism, or subjectivity, that also apparently endangers it. In the spirit of truthiness, one thus finds an awkwardly complex pharmakon: suspicion is at once the poison, remedy, and scapegoat of truth.

## Bionote

Alexandra Grieve-Johnson is a gardener and critical thinker with an academic background in phenomenology, feminist philosophy, and ethics. She has written on Heidegger's late works, Levinas, Irigaray, and Plato. She writes to find clarity on the existential threats of climate change, and the interruptions to dwelling under the troubled relationship between *technē* and *poiēsis*. She is also interested in a potential phenomenology of the digital, and navigating a space for dwelling between virtual and post-ecological worlds. She spends the remainder of her time bird and wildlife watching, practicing horticulture, and keeping house. She lives in Tasmania, Australia.

## References

- Heidegger, Martin, 2008. *Basic Writings*. London: Routledge.
- Russell, Bertrand, 1997. *Problems of Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press
- "WATCH LIVE: President Trump Delivers Remarks on Venezuela". YouTube Video, 49:00. "PBS NewsHour", February 18, 2019.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yz3se4F7Zk>